

## GOODWIN'S WEEKLY

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## LES NOIRS: THE BLACK SOLDIERS OF FRANCE

By M. H. Anson.

After the battle on the Ourcq, the American ambulance arrived about midnight at the little village of Le Meux, where the church had been turned into an emergency hospital. Among the writhing wounded, one of the doctors noticed a thing whose clothes were stiff and black with what he knew was blood. He threw his electric light full upon it. The thing rolled the whites of its eyes, and out of a black face flashed huge white teeth as it said with a smile:

"Will monsieur kindly give me a cigarette?"

It was a Senegali, a soldier of one of the black regiments which France had brought over from Africa. He had nine wounds, all serious and painful.

"Get a stretcher!" ordered the doctor.

"Don't trouble," said the Senegali. "Carry me out in your arms. Time counts for the rest."

Outside the door, he said, "Now put me down and give me a cigarette and go back to the others." The ambulance men refused. Then the Senegali began to swear—and as one man speaking to another, they understood that he meant what he said, and they obeyed.

Three hours later the Senegali was in the hospital of the American ambulance at Neuilly, just outside the fortifications of Paris, and when the doctors came to give the first dressing of his wounds, they found him fast asleep. They had to wake him to dress his wounds, among which was an arm shattered by a bullet. During the probing he never uttered a sound, and half an hour after the surgeons had finished him, he was sound asleep again. The next day his temperature was one hundred and five, but all day long he smoked and smiled and demanded bread. The dainties did not appeal to him. A big hunk of bread that he could break into biteable pieces was his ideal meal.

Typical as this is of all the African soldiers that follow the tricolor, it explains why France loves her "Blacks."

An American, born into the heritage of color prejudice, can scarcely understand this attitude. That is because he knows neither the French nor the Blacks. First, there is no color line in France. In her domestic history there has never been a situation that would call it out. Next, the Blacks have no heritage of centuries of suffering under slavery. Third, the colonial policy of France has always been to the end of reconciling the conquered black and brown barbarians to the march of civilization and eventually enlisting them—natural warriors as they are—on the side of France in her campaign against other unconquered desert tribes.

Until 1913 Paris knew "Les Noirs" solely by reputation, by pictures, and through tales of their prowess under French leadership. The novelty of the annual military review on July 14—Bastille Day—this year, however, was provided by companies of the black regiments that had been specially brought over from Africa; and with a

whoop of delight Paris capitulated. To Americans these Blacks were also a revelation, and before his holiday stay was over many an American was forced to acknowledge a grudging admiration.

Superb animals they are, marvelous fighting machines as well, from the favorite giant of a Senegali, through the copper-colored "Toucouleurs" and the blue-black Moors, to the huge Bambaras with their shoulders of the athlete.

Of them all the Senegali is, perhaps, the greatest favorite with the public, for the French love their insouciance, their great good nature. "Les grands enfants," their officers call them. For with all his superb physical power, his great prowess in arms, the Senegali is at heart nothing but a little child, made glad by a kind word, or a friendly pat, and giving to the European officers who have won his confidence the blind devotion of a dog.

He has seen the progress of French arms in Africa, and he has learned by experience thus gained that the French "know how." They know how to conquer the most formidable desert tribes; know how, then, to win their confidence; know how to train them in the methods of civilized warfare; know how, finally, to win their loyalty so that within two years they are willing to fight under the leadership of their one-time conquerors against their blood-brothers of the desert.

Officers who have served in Africa and who have learned to understand and to appreciate these Blacks love them for their unhesitating confidence, their valor, their spirit, their perfect self-abnegation, their scrupulous regard for orders and their duty. On the march they are a joy. They seem to know no suffering beyond that inflicted by a thorn in a foot: they are never ill. The natural love of the negro for fine feathers makes them look after their uniforms with the greatest solicitude, while as natural warriors they care for their firearms and general equipment better than many seasoned white soldiers. As they swing along, they keep their formation like automats, their rifles are carried at exactly the angle prescribed in the regulations, and the "traveling cupboard" that the French infantryman carries on his back is inclined at exactly the requisite position.

Stories from the battlefields in France where the Senegalis have been engaged say always that they sang as they fought. The Senegali always sings. He sings on the march—strange, weird folksongs glorifying the deeds of bygone heroes of his tribe; he sings in camp, as he sets his tent, as he crouches by the fire, cooking his simple food, or as he burnishes his equipment. And when he is not singing, it is probably because he is laughing. For the Senegali laughs upon the slightest provocation—the infantile laugh of a super-healthy, happy child. Yet under fire, under the confusion of surprise night attacks that characterize the Moroccan campaigns, the Senegali is the personification of sangfroid. Without confusion, without noise, he is in his place even before his officers. He may have neglected the little detail of putting on any clothes, but as a fighting machine he is all there, rifle in hand, quivering with eagerness for the first word of command.

Included under the general term of Senegali are representatives of nearly all the races of French Africa—first, in point of numbers, the Bambaras, then "Toucouleurs" and Peuhls, all first-class warriors by heredity; Ouolofs, good soldiers, but quarrelsome and difficult to control; Moors, Baoules, Haoussas and some Soussous.

The aristocrat of the Blacks, however, is the Spahi. He is an Arabian St. George in a pointed beard, a gentleman of the desert from his towering turban and his voluminous purple bournous to the red heels of his boots. He is the scout

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